

Connecting Place with Science: Katie John and the Tanada Creek Fish Weir

by Vicki O. Penwell

When planning field work, researchers generally select the place for their research based on the location of a specific feature or resource. But “place” is more complex than a set of GPS coordinates. When researchers consider place as a complete landscape with natural and human elements and use that landscape as part of their research design, the result will be a more complete investigation with more relevance to the public. In addition, as national parks strive to reconnect people to protected places, recognizing and honoring connections already present establishes trust and collaboration with stake holders. For example, by honoring the connection Elder Katie John of Mentasta has to a specific place and a specific resource, Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve (Wrangell-St. Elias), through the Tanada Creek Fish Weir, has experienced better relations and greater collaboration with traditional users of park resources.

Nataetde

People are as much a part of the Wrangell-St. Elias landscape as the horizon dominating Wrangell Mountains. Ahtna people have lived in the Copper River basin for at least 6,000 years (Bleakley 2006). Each Ahtna band had a territory that included summer fish camps, winter hunting and trapping camps, and places to harvest other resources. The two most critical resources to the Ahtna were salmon and caribou.

For the Upper Ahtna, *Nataetde*, which is the village now known as Batzulnetas, is an important site both in terms of historic events and the resources available there. The last generation of Ahtna to grow-up at Batzulnetas are now Elders. Thanks to them, park researchers have invaluable access to traditional ecological knowledge. The ties between Elders and Batzulnetas and other traditional seasonal camps in Wrangell-St. Elias are evident in stories associated with the sites. These stories teach cultural norms and values as well as traditions. New stories emerge each year, perpetuating the enduring connections between people and place.

Lieutenant Henry T. Allen visited *Nataetde* during his exploration of the Copper, Tanana, and Koyukuk Rivers in 1885. One of Allen’s assignments was to assess the potential threat posed by natives, so he recorded his observations about the Ahtna and Upper Tanana people whose villages he visited and who served as guides for his expedition. Allen traveled as far up the Copper River as *Nataetde* before turning north toward the Tanana. He arrived at *Nataetde* on June 2, 1885. Allen was met by 45 villagers led by *Bets’ulnii Ta’*, the chief of the village.

Allen stayed only two days in *Nataetde*. There was very little food and the people were anxiously awaiting the arrival of the first salmon of the summer. During Allen’s two-day stay in the village, the first fish arrived. Allen described it as a “rather small silver salmon” that was given

a place of honor on one of the spruce bough shelters. In spite of the promise of hundreds of fish, Allen decided to leave. He left *Nataetde* on June 4 for Suslota Lake where he hoped to find caribou (Cole 1985).

Allen’s maps of the upper Copper River refer to *Nataetde* as Batzulnetas Village (Cole 1985). Since the miners and others who followed him relied on his maps, the name stuck. He probably understood that was not the name of the village but rather the name of the chief, *Bets’ulnii Ta’*, Father of Someone Respects Him (Kari 1986).

Katie John

Katie John is one of Charley and Sarah Sanford’s children. She was born in 1915 near *Sil’ana’* (the Slana River) and grew up at Batzulnetas. Katie spent her youth making the seasonal rounds between summer fish camp at Batzulnetas and hunting and trapping camps. She knows the old ways of harvesting and preparing food and the rules people followed to live together peacefully. Katie calls these “Indian Laws” (Katie John, *personal communication*). According to Katie, breaking rules associated with salmon and salmon harvest is particularly *engii* (taboo), because the Ahtna understand the life-cycle of the salmon, it’s journey to the sea and coming back to die (Kopchak 2005).

One of Katie’s Batzulnetas stories is about her father’s fence across Tanada Creek and the fish traps built for harvesting sockeye salmon. The fence was built of spruce branches and willow. There was an opening in the middle of the fence where her father placed the traps. They were cylinders made of spruce branches and spruce roots and designed so that the salmon could swim into the trap but couldn’t swim back out. A trap could hold as many as 60 salmon. Every so often, the traps would be removed and the fish prepared for drying. The traps stayed out of the creek while fish were processed. During this time, the

salmon could pass through the fence and go to Tanada Lake. In about 1943 a few years prior to Charley Sanford's death, Katie remembers a game warden came to Batzulnetas and told her father he couldn't block the creek like that. This visit proved to be the first collision between "white fella's law" and "Indian law" when it came to managing salmon (Katie John, *personal communication*).

Katie married Fred John in 1932. They raised 14 children and numerous adopted children. Their home was at Mentasta Lake, but Katie and Fred continued to utilize many of the same traditional camps that Katie had as a child. Beginning in about 1950 when children were required to attend school, Fred and Katie reduced their travel but still returned to Batzulnetas for salmon. Then in 1964, the Alaska Board of Fisheries and Game closed subsistence fishing at Batzulnetas. By this time, the Copper River fishery supported large numbers of subsistence, sport, and commercial salmon fishing activities. State managers feared that if too many salmon were harvested up river, it would lead to fewer fish being available to down river consumers (Norris 2002).

Katie John v. State of Alaska and the United States

Following the establishment of Wrangell-St. Elias NP&P, Katie and Doris Charles of Dot Lake decided that they wanted to go back to Batzulnetas to fish. In 1984, Katie and Doris presented their proposal to the Alaska Board of Fisheries. The board denied the proposal. Katie and Doris were told to fish at downriver sites where subsistence fishing was allowed (Norris 2002).

In 1985 Katie and Doris, represented by the Native American Rights Fund (NARF) filed suit against the State of Alaska (*Katie John vs. State of Alaska*). In 1987, the Alaska Board of Fisheries ruled that locals could be issued permits

to harvest 1,000 salmon at Batzulnetas. Then in 1989 the Alaska Supreme Court issued its *McDowell* decision, striking down any preference given to rural native and non-native subsistence users over Alaskans living in urban areas. "The net result of the year's two court decisions was the creation of a subsistence fishery that included Batzulnetas in which all Alaskans could take part, regardless of their rural or urban residency" (Norris 2002).



Katie John and Vicki Penwell, 2006 Day Camp.

In 1990 Katie and Doris filed a new law suit against the federal government. Essentially, *Katie John vs. United States of America* sought to broaden the definition of "public lands" found in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) to include navigable waters and specifically for a federal subsistence fishery at Batzulnetas.

On April 20, 1995, Senior Circuit Judge Eugene A. Wright of the Ninth U.S. Court of Appeals issued the court's ruling in favor of Katie John. The Court found that public lands include those navigable waters in which the United States has an interest. On October 1, 1999, after numerous delays, federal agencies began managing subsistence fishing. Alaska Governor Tony Knowles having failed to secure a state constitutional subsistence amendment, visited Katie John at Batzulnetas in August 2001 and told her there would be no further appeals by the state (Norris 2002).

Batzulnetas Culture Camp

In June 1995 Mentasta Lake Village and Cheesh'na Village came together for a Culture Camp to honor Elders, to celebrate the Ninth Circuit Court's decision, and Katie and Doris' acquisition of allotments at Batzulnetas. Village leaders intended the camp to be a one-time event, but according to Wilson Justin, of Mount Sanford Tribal Consortium, the camp was so popular and the demand for additional camps so high, the two villages decided to make

the camp an annual event. In 1996, John Jarvis, then superintendent of Wrangell-St. Elias, received the first invitation to attend Culture Camp, beginning a tradition honored today (Wilson Justin, *personal communication*).

Tanada Creek Fish Weir

In the fall of 1996, Wrangell-St. Elias received funding to install a weir in Tanada Creek just below Batzulnetas. A weir is a fence that blocks the migration of fish upriver with a gate that can be opened to allow the passage of fish. Often, as is the case for the Tanada Creek weir, the gate is part of a large box that allows fish to be trapped and biological sampling done prior to the fish moving upstream. A crew of three or four per shift would access the site using the existing trail from Nabesna Road but would need to cross Katie John's allotment to access the creek and to operate the weir. Katie agreed, and the first Tanada Creek Fish Weir was installed in June 1997.

The original purpose of the weir was to document abundance and run timing of Tanada Lake sockeye salmon stocks, and to ensure that the Batzulnetas subsistence fishery was not having a negative impact on the sustainability of the stocks. Run abundance and timing are still important elements of the research underway at the weir. In addition, park managers use weir data to assess the overall health of sockeye populations in the Copper River upstream of the Gulkana River. Most of the sockeye salmon that migrate up the Copper River spawn outside of the park. The Tanada Lake sockeye salmon stocks are some of the largest to spawn and rear within park/preserve boundaries, so monitoring is a high priority (Veatch and McCormick 2005).

The first weir was a rigid or picket weir. It consisted of a series of galvanized poles connected together to create a fence across the creek. A "box" was installed in an opening in the fence in the channel of the creek. The box had gates at either end that could be opened or closed. During periods when the crew was present, the gates were open allowing fish to pass up stream through the box. The crew manually counted each salmon. Salmon could be trapped in the box so the crew could collect biological data.

Tanada Creek is subject to high water events and the rigid weir did not perform well under flooding conditions.

In 2001, the rigid weir was abandoned in favor of a floating resistance board weir. This design incorporates a system of PVC conduit stringers anchored to a cable on the creek bed. A resistance board attached to the conduit uses the current to keep the stringers afloat.

High water events still posed a problem. In some cases water flooded over the bank of the creek and salmon bypassed the weir entirely. Both as a measure to replicate the weir count and as a fail-safe during flooding, a video monitoring system was installed in 2001. This system was in place adjacent to the weir until 2006 when it was moved to a location approximately one mile upstream from the weir.

Connecting Science and Place

Katie John is 90 years old and still goes to Batzulnetas for the week of Culture Camp. She sleeps in a tent on a pad on the ground each night and says she never sleeps better. Katie told me that she wants her kids to build her a cabin there. She laughed and said she thinks they will not do it because they know she will never want to leave. As Katie tells the story about her father's "fence", she gestures to the creek and uses her hands to simulate building the traps. Each time I hear her words and look at the creek, I can imagine the fence. The smell of smoke from the smoldering fire under the drying salmon and moose reaches me and it is difficult to come back to the present.

During Culture Camp, people meet each other on the trail going to Batzulnetas for camp or going to work at the weir. Usually we stop to talk—how are the bugs, did you get a moose yet, are you staying for lunch? While we sit around the fire together, we share concerns about daily life and always talk about salmon. The Elders tell stories about early days in Batzulnetas. Through these stories, we have learned that the Tanada Creek fishery has changed. The Elders say the fish are smaller and there are not as many. They also say that the area has much more brush than it did years ago.

Eric Veach, Chief of Natural and Cultural Resources for Wrangell-St. Elias, notes that the relationship between the weir and Culture Camp provides him with valuable traditional ecological knowledge about the salmon and the ecology of Tanada Creek. It also provides him with an additional way to assess the needs of subsistence users. By visit-

ing with villagers during the summer rather than waiting until the winter, he has a better understanding of people's fishing goals and of their needs. With salmon as an icon of common interest, a trust-based relationship has developed. Eric and his staff have a strong commitment to the project because they realize that what they are doing has meaning to the people making use of the resource.

Katie's granddaughter, Kathryn Martin, echoes Eric's sentiments. Over the years of watching the weir and getting to know park staff better, she can trust park staff with her concerns. Kathryn thinks that, this positive experience has led park managers to have a higher level of understanding of Ahtna culture and more sensitivity about how decisions might affect traditional practices (*Kathryn Martin, personal communication*).

During the summer of 2006, I spoke with people from Mentasta, Chistochina and Slana about the weir. Without exception, local residents enthusiastically supported the weir. Wilson Justin told me that the park's interest in the Batzulnetas salmon shows people that park management cares about the things that are important to them. People at Culture Camp appreciate that something they had known for so long is being formally studied. Residents of Slana also supported the project. Overall, people expressed pride in the project and assumed that it would always be there in some form or another.

Conclusion

Places are more than points on a map. They are part of peoples' sensory experiences, of the collective memory of a culture and are characters in stories that preserve traditional knowledge. When places are considered in this way, it is easier to understand why Katie John did not want to fish any place but Batzulnetas and why the Tanada Creek Fish Weir accomplishes more than just counting fish.

Researchers and managers can make projects more relevant to people by looking for connections that already exist and considering how projects might enhance those connections. By incorporating opportunities for people to share their knowledge and their stories, research will be more relevant to them and to the public in general.

When peoples' connections to places are honored,

agencies become groups of individuals and more approachable. By honoring connections, management efforts take on a proactive, problem solving role, and people regard research as having practical applications. Honoring the connections of elders and others to these places by making use of and valuing traditional knowledge and individual stories makes parks more relevant and more emotionally accessible to a public increasingly centered in urban areas. Most importantly, honoring existing connections between protected places and people leads to future generations of park stewards.

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